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ABSTRACT

This digest reviews the recent history of advertising to children, spotlights controversial marketing efforts, and examines the nature of commercial messages directed toward children in public schools. Because of the increase in children's spending power in recent decades, advertisers have closely targeted children as consumers. Advertising strategies aimed at children include toy-related programs or program-length commercials, kids' clubs, store displays directed at children, direct mailing to children, and marketer-sponsored school activities. Advertising in schools takes many forms, one of the most controversial of which has been "Channel One," a 12-minute daily news show for students in grades 6 through 12 that includes 2 minutes of age-appropriate ads. Some educators defend the use of commercially produced materials as a way of providing useful supplements to the curriculum or of raising funds and building bridges to businesses. Other educators oppose it, fearing that market values may replace democratic values in schools, pointing to increased pressure on teachers' and administrators' time, and believing that students comprise a captive audience. One report that stresses students as a captive audience divides in-school commercialism into four categories: (1) in-school ads; (2) ads in classroom materials and programs; (3) corporate-sponsored educational materials and programs; and (4) corporate-sponsored contests and incentives programs. Professional organizations in education have supported the development of guidelines for using commercial messages in schools. Several consumer groups have formulated such guidelines, based on an approach that includes reviewing all sponsored materials, pursuing noncommercial partnerships with businesses, and teaching media literacy to elementary school students. However, in light of the controversial nature of the issue, public discussion and workable policies are needed. (BC)

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Advertising in the Schools

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Many advertisers view children as a uniquely profitable three-in-one market: as buyers themselves, as influencers of their parents' purchases, and as future adult consumers. Each year, elementary school children have an estimated $15 billion of their own money, of which they spend an estimated $11 billion on such products as toys, clothes, candy, and snacks. Children influence at least $160 billion in parental purchases (McNeal, 1994). As future adults, children are potential consumers for all goods and services. This digest reviews the recent history of advertising to children, spotlights controversial marketing efforts, and focuses attention on the evolving nature of commercial messages directed toward children in the public schools.

Because of the increase in children's spending power in recent decades, advertisers have closely targeted children as consumers (Wartella, 1995). New advertising strategies aimed at children steadily proliferate. The toy-related program or program-length commercial, in which a television program is developed to sell toys, is one that has stirred public attention and debates, as have the 900-number telephone services aimed at children. In the 1980s, children got their own TV networks, radio networks, magazines, newspapers, kids' clothing brands, books, banking, and such high-ticket items as video games and other high-tech products. Other recent advertising tactics include kids' clubs, store displays directed at children, direct mailing to children and their parents, and marketer-sponsored school activities. Linking their products to educational goals, advertisers have reached into the schools by sponsoring such activities as literacy programs, reading projects, anti-drug campaigns, and communication skills training, while rewarding students for good performance with coupons for products and free meals. This spread of advertising in the schools can be seen as part of a historical pattern toward the commercialization of youth (Wartella, 1995).

Channel One

Because children spend 20 percent of their time in schools, advertisers have been eager to pursue school-based marketing in many forms. Although traditionally there have been links between business and education in this country (Harty, 1979), commercialism in schools has recently skyrocketed and has spurred public debate. In 1989, controversy arose when Whittle Communications (now Channel One Communications) announced the test marketing in six school districts of "Channel One"—a 12-minute daily news show for students in grades 6 through 12 that included two minutes of age-appropriate ads for products like jeans and soft drinks. In exchange for airing the program each day at the same time for three years, Channel One Communications gives schools a satellite dish, a cable hookup, a television monitor for each classroom, and an agreement to service the equipment for three years. While some state school systems originally said no to "Channel One," the Consumers Union Education Services (CUES) (1995) notes that Channel One Communications reports its program is viewed in 350,000 classrooms. A further concern is that the presence of "Channel One" in classrooms may be evident more in some neighborhoods than in others. For example, one study (Morgan, 1993) found that among those schools showing "Channel One," a disproportionate number are located in areas of high poverty.

Although "Channel One" has attracted a great deal of public attention, in-school advertising takes many other forms as well. According to James McNeal (1990):

> In-school advertising is being talked about more, and in a more critical manner, because of the increasing amounts of it and because of the advent of television advertising in schools. (Criticisms of TV advertising in schools seem to be directed mainly at Whittle ... because of its intrusive nature and because the firm flaunts its ability to buy its way into schools.) In-school advertising takes an endless number of forms—scoreboards and billboards in athletic areas, posters, pamphlets, book covers, lesson plans, films, and vending machines. (p.73)

Although some educators defend the use of commercially produced materials as a way of providing useful supplements to the curriculum or as a way of raising funds and building needed bridges to businesses, other educators oppose it, fearing that market values may, for the most part, take the place of democratic values in the schools. Those who defend the trend argue that commercialism is highly prevalent throughout our society and a bit more advertising in the schools should not adversely affect students. Critics of the trend, however, point to increased pressure on teachers' and administrators' time as they sort through offers from businesses. Many educators do not want to participate in offering up students as a captive audience. According to Molnar (1995), failure to change policies by the end of the century will result in solidifying public education's role in delivering corporate profits.

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Types of Advertising

"Captive Kids," a new report by the CUES (1995) summarizes the routes of commercial messages into schools, examines some of those messages, and discusses the meaning of the enormous influx of corporate-produced materials into the schools. The report, which is a follow-up to the earlier report, "Selling America's Kids" (CUES, 1990), divides the examples of in-school commercialism into four categories:

In-School Ads. In-school ads are conspicuous forms of advertising that can be seen on billboards, on school buses, on scoreboards, and in school hallways. In-school ads include ads on book covers and in piped-in radio programming. Advertising is also found in product coupons and in give-aways that are distributed in schools.

Ads in Classroom Materials and Programs. Ads in classroom materials include any commercial messages in magazines or video programming used in school. The ads in "Channel One" fall into this category.

Corporate-Sponsored Educational Materials and Programs. Promotional messages appearing in sponsored educational materials may be more subtle than those in the previous categories. Sponsored educational materials include free or low-cost items which can be used for instruction. These teaching aids may take the form of multimedia teaching kits, videotapes, software, books, posters, reproducible activity sheets, and workbooks. While some of these materials may be ad-free, others may contain advertising for the producer of the item, or they may contain biased information aimed at swaying students toward a company's products or services.

Corporate-Sponsored Contests and Incentive Programs. Contests and incentive programs bring brand names into the schools along with the promise of such rewards as free pizzas, cash, points toward buying educational equipment, or trips and other prizes.

Guidelines and Policies

What are appropriate policies for addressing the increasing flow of commercial messages into schools? Those who support the call for guidelines include education groups such as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the National Parent Teacher Association, and the National Education Association. The Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals in Business (SOCAP) and Consumers International are two consumer interest groups that have formulated guidelines for sponsored materials. These guidelines suggest that education materials should be accurate, objective, clearly written, nondiscriminatory, and noncommercial (Karpatkin & Holmes, 1995, p.75).

According to Karpatkin and Holmes, the Consumers Union supports the notion of schools as "ad-free zones." The overall goal of collaboration between businesses and schools should be for business leaders, educators, parents, and government officials to work together "... to embrace practical, responsible approaches that will protect the educational integrity of our school systems" (Karpatkin & Holmes, 1995, p.75). In dealing with the issues of in-school commercialism, Karpatkin & Holmes suggest a three-pronged approach that includes:

- Reviewing all sponsored materials and activities and holding them to the same standards as other curriculum items by using the SOCAP or Consumers International guidelines.
- Pursuing noncommercial partnerships with businesses and rejecting the notion that it is ethical to bring advertising into the schools to provide materials or funds to bolster dwindling budgets.
- Beginning the teaching of media literacy in elementary school, to help educate children to be critical readers of advertising, propaganda, and other mass-mediated messages, while helping them gain the skills to be intelligent, aware consumers.

Conclusion

With the expanding presence of advertising targeted to younger and younger children, schools have become involved in serving up students as captive audiences to advertisers. It is time to pause and reflect on the appropriateness of various kinds of connections between businesses and schools, and the influence those connections might have on the integrity of education in a democracy. In light of the controversial nature of the issue, as well as the underlying ambivalence toward it, public discussion and workable policies are needed.

For More Information

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